THE STUDY OF SEMITIC SYNTAX

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In the short space of this paper, I shall not attempt to present a systematic survey of all work on the syntax of the Semitic languages. I shall restrict myself to discussing various general features that have characterized the study of Semitic syntax at various periods. A large proportion of my remarks will concern recent developments in the discipline and the possible directions it may take in the future.

The general trends in recent research on Semitic syntax cannot be fully assessed without viewing them against the background of the history of grammatical thought. I believe that it is important to consider the developments that have taken place in a broad historical perspective from the beginnings of grammatical studies of Semitic languages in the Middle Ages until the present day. This is because, in my opinion, some aspects of the general approach and purpose of recent studies in Semitic syntax exhibit parallels to those of the earliest grammatical studies. In certain respects, studies of the syntax of Semitic languages at the end of this millennium have come full circle and are closer in spirit to the earliest grammatical inquiries at the beginning of the millennium than ever before. I do not wish to argue, of course, that modern studies in Semitic syntax are not offering anything new or that they do not represent progress in our understanding. The point that I wish to make is that there are parallels in general perspective and purpose between the approach to syntax in the earliest and most recent periods and that recognition of these parallels may help us to assess the directions in which the discipline is moving. For this reason I think it is helpful to go beyond a consideration of the work achieved in the 20th century and devote some space to the development of the discipline in earlier periods.

It may be argued that some of the earliest syntactic statements regarding Semitic languages are descriptions of the relationship between words and larger components of speech that occur in works concerned with the transmission and exegesis of the Holy Scriptures. The Scriptures of Eastern Christianity, Judaism and Islam, which were in Syriac, Hebrew and Arabic respectively, were transmitted from an early period in both a written tradition and also a reading tradition. The reading traditions were originally passed on orally, at least in the case of the Syriac and

Hebrew Scriptures, until a graphic notation was developed to represent them in manuscripts. The Syriac and Hebrew reading traditions included not only the way that the consonants and vowels were pronounced but also expressions of the connection between syntactic components and even the function of syntactic components. This was expressed by a system of pauses and pitch changes in the recitation of the texts. Technical terminology was developed to express the interpretation of these features of the reading traditions. The earliest examples of this are found in the Syriac tradition, where we find already before the 7th century A.D. terms such as *pāsoqā* "breaking-off", *samkā* "support", *rahṭā* "running", *mša'lānā* "interrogative" (Segal 1953:64).

In the Jewish tradition, some of the earliest analyses of the relation between syntactic components are interpretations of the relationships in meaning that are reflected by the pauses and connections expressed in the biblical reading tradition. This is found, for example, in a Hebrew grammatical text know as the *Diqduq* that was written in the tenth century by the Karaite Jew Joseph ben Noaḥ. Although written down in the second half of the tenth century, the text represents a tradition of grammatical exposition that existed in earlier generations. This text is not a systematic grammatical treatise but has the form of a commentary on the Bible that discusses grammatical and exegetical issues in the Biblical text (cf. Khan 1998 and 1999). There is no fully developed theory of syntactic categories and syntactic relations. Divisions and connections expressed by the reading tradition, however, are considered to reflect divisions and connections in meaning between words and larger components. The examination of relations between components often goes beyond what we would now term the level of the sentence. The approach can be seen as the explanation of linguistic structure by the application of rhetorical exegesis. Some aspects of Joseph ben Noaḥ's analysis of relations in meaning between components can indeed be traced back to hermeneutical principles that were developed in the earlier Rabbinic tradition (cf. Khan 2000). It is important to take into consideration that the primary purpose of the early Hebrew grammatical text of Joseph ben Noaḥ was not to present a description of the Hebrew language but rather to elucidate the text of Scripture by an examination of its grammatical structure. His presentation was not intended to comprehend all the structures of the language. He formulates some general rules, but is particularly concerned with the analysis of individual constructions that require elucidation. As far as the relationship between components is concerned, each construction tends to be treated separately and interpreted according to its individual context.

The earliest form of syntactic analysis of Arabic is likewise found in exegetical texts. These are commentaries on the Quran from the first

two centuries of Islam (7th–8th centuries A.D.). They do not present a full taxonomy of syntactic structures, but discuss various aspects of the relationship in meaning between words and larger components, sometimes above the level of the sentence (cf. Versteegh 1993). As is the case with the Hebrew grammatical text of Joseph ben Noaḥ, these early Quran commentaries are primarily concerned with the elucidation of the text of Scripture rather than the analysis of language. By the third century of Islam (9th century A.D.), the study of Arabic grammar as an independent discipline had been established. This developed mainly in the so-called Basran school of Arabic grammar, the framework of whose teachings was set by the grammarian Sībawayhi. Within this new discipline of Arabic grammar, a considerable amount of attention was given to syntax. The primary purpose of the discipline was no longer the elucidation of a text but rather the study of the structure of the language as a dynamic system of expression. It took account not only of what is attested in a given text but also the potential expression of the language. As a result of this, the focus was on the language structure itself more than on the context in which it was used. The scope of analysis, moreover, became restricted as a general rule to the level of the sentence. The study of language in the context of its use continued, however, in works on Arabic rhetoric (*al-balāġa*), which became a separate discipline from that of grammar. This discipline was principally concerned with the relation between thought and expression, which included a study of sentence structure and the appropriate context of its use.

A tradition of studying language as an independent discipline was also developed for Hebrew by Jewish scholars in the Middle Ages. This seems to have developed mainly under the influence of the Arabic grammatical tradition.

With a few exceptions, however, syntax did not preoccupy the Hebrew grammarians to the same extent as the Arabic grammarians. This applied especially to the Hebrew grammarians of Spain, through which the tradition of Hebrew grammar was transmitted to Christian Europe. One grammarian who applied Arabic syntactic theory extensively to Hebrew was the Karaite Abū al-Faraj Hārūn (first half of the eleventh century), who was the pupil of Joseph ben Noaḥ in Jerusalem. His grammatical works were known by some scholars in Spain, but they did not appear to have had much influence and knowledge of them was not transmitted to Christian Europe at a later period (Bacher 1895). The Spanish grammarian Jonah ibn Janaḥ devoted five chapters of his Hebrew grammar book *Kitāb al-Luma'* ("The book of coloured flowerbeds") to aspects of rhetoric, some of which could be considered to belong to syntax, such as inversion of word order. By the late Middle Ages, however, the vestiges of the medieval tradition of Hebrew

grammar in Europe were restricted to phonology and morphology. In 1523 the Jewish scholar Abraham de Balmes published a Hebrew grammar (*Miqneh Avram*) that used the taxonomy of grammatical categories that was currently used for the description of Latin. Much of this taxonomy had its roots in the writings of the Classical Latin grammarians, such as Priscian. This included a long chapter with a comprehensive treatment on syntax. It applied contemporary syntactic concepts such as *compositio et regimen*, which included features like the combination of nouns and verbs and the agreement between subject and predicate. At this period Christian scholars of Europe began to write grammars of Hebrew and Arabic. They drew to some extent on the medieval Oriental traditions, but followed the Latin tradition of grammatical taxonomy in the organization of their grammars. As a general rule, however, these early Christian grammars of Hebrew and Arabic were concerned mainly with morphology rather than syntax. This is clear from the works of the leading Christian grammarians of Arabic and Hebrew, such as the Arabic grammar of Thomas Erpenius (Leiden 1613), which contained only eight pages of syntax, and the Hebrew grammar of Johannes Reuchlin (*De rudimentis Hebraicis*, 1506) and those of Sebastian Muenster (e.g. *Epitome Hebraicae grammaticae*, 1537 and *Institutiones Grammaticae in Hebraeam Linguam*, 1524), which contained no syntax at all. In the Latin tradition, the discipline of rhetoric was completely separate from that of grammar.

The syntax of Semitic languages received more attention from European scholars in the 19th century. This is shown, for example, by the thorough treatment of Arabic syntax in the *Grammaire Arabe* of Antoine Silvestre de Sacy, which first appeared in 1810. This was based both on the contemporary taxonomy of syntax as used for Latin and also on the syntactic taxonomy of the native Arab grammarians. Thorough treatments of syntax are also found in the works of other 19th century scholars. We may mention, by way of illustration, the grammars of Ewald (Hebrew and Arabic), Gesenius, Bötcher, König (Hebrew), Nöldeke (Syriac, Mandaean), Dillmann (Ethiopic), Praetorius (Amharic) and Wright (Arabic). Syntax was also treated independently from the rest of the grammar, as is the case, for example, in Reckendorf's exposition of Arabic syntax (1895–1898). The taxonomy of these treatments of syntax was essentially similar, namely one based on the Latin tradition with some modifications derived from the medieval Arabic tradition. There was also a general consensus about the boundaries of the study of syntax, namely the level of the sentence. It should be noted, however, that the taxonomy in the 19th century tended to be driven more by the data than in some works of earlier centuries, in which Semitic syntactic constructions were often forced, inappropriately, into the Procrustean bed of Latin categories.

The influence of the native Arabic tradition of grammar is, of course, most conspicuous in grammars of Arabic that were written in Europe in the 19th century. This is particularly clear in the grammar of W. Wright (first edition 1862), which is ultimately based on an earlier grammar of C.P. Caspari (1848). It had been recognized already by Silvestre de Sacy, however, that a "scientific" presentation of the syntax of Arabic must distinguish between the tradition of the native Arabic grammarians and the views concerning language that were current in contemporary European linguistic thought. This is shown by the fact that Silvestre de Sacy in his treatment of Arabic syntax places his description that is based on the Arabic grammarians in a separate section from the description that is based on contemporary general linguistics. By the end of the 19th century, many European scholars had moved away almost completely from the framework of the medieval Arabic grammarians in their descriptions of Arabic syntax. This is the case, for example, with the works of Reckendorf (1898) and Nöldeke (1886).

The same basic framework for syntactic description continued to be used in many Semitic grammars throughout the 20th century, including the grammars of the recently discovered Semitic languages such as Akkadian and Ugaritic. Separate volumes devoted entirely to systematic treatments of syntax have also continued to be produced. We may mention, by way of illustration, the *Arabische Syntax* of Reckendorf (1921), which was a sequel to his work *Die syntaktischen Verhältnisse des Arabischen* (1895–98), and also other syntaxes of Arabic and its dialects such as Feghali (1928), Blau (1960) and Cantarino (1974–75), Watson (1993). Various volumes have been devoted to systematic treatments of Biblical Hebrew syntax, e.g. Davidson (1901, recently reworked by Gibson 1994), Brockelmann (1956), Williams (1976) and Waltke and O'Connor (1990). Note also Schlesinger (1928) on Babylonian Aramaic.

This framework of "traditional grammar," as it has now come to be known, consists of the identification of syntactic categories and their arrangement in an organized scheme of presentation. This approach to syntactic description, accordingly, has been termed "category and arrangement". It has proved to be a successful way of presenting the attested syntactic structures in a language, as is shown by the fact that many of the descriptions of Semitic syntax that were made at the end of the 19th and during the first half of the 20th century are still widely consulted today.

The traditional category and arrangement presentation of syntax is concerned primarily with the classification of syntactic structure. The meaning and function of the various syntactic structures were, nonetheless, given considerable attention. It was recognized that certain syntactic

structures had a variety of different functions. Although the limit of structural analysis was the sentence, one finds in some of the Semitic grammars from the end of 19th or the first half of the 20th century some consideration of the surrounding discourse context in order to elucidate the function of the structure. This is seen, for example, in the description of syntax by Brockelmann in the second volume of his *Grundriss der vergleichenden Grammatik der semitischen Sprachen.* The placement of the subject before the verb in those languages that have the predominant order verb-subject is said to occur "at the beginning of narratives" (*Grundriss* II, 171–172). The semantic relations between clauses that are not marked explicity by syntactic subordination are also discussed by Brockelmann. In his description of co-ordinated clauses ("beigeordnete Sätze") he refers to relations such as "contrast" ("Gegensatz"), "motivation" ("Begründung"), "elucidation" ("Erläuterung"), "purpose" ("Absicht") (*Grundriss* II, 471–499). A separate section (*Grundriss* II, 501–506) is devoted to "circumstantial clauses" largely on functional rather than structural grounds and some classification is made of the various different contexts in which such clauses are used.

The function of some syntactic structures was also sought in psychological notions of language. Some of these may seem impressionistic today. Ewald (1879:152–158), for example, in his treatment of Hebrew syntax, explains the placement of a subject in initial position in a circumstantial clause as a means of presenting us with "a harmonious and placid picture of something continuous." Inversion of the usual word order, he claims, may also be used to impart a "tinge of juvenile restlessness and vivacity" (English translation by James Kennedy) to the clause and thus place "emphasis" on one of the elements. It should be noted, however, that similar impressionistic notions of "emphasis" have continued to be used to explain inversions of word order throughout the 20th century.

At the end of the 19th century, psychological theories of language, such as the concept of psychological starting point or "psychological subject" were used to explain word order in Semitic languages. These notions were developed by G. von der Gabelentz (1869:378) and subsequently also by W. Wundt (1900–20) and were applied also to Indo-European languages at this period (see Khan 1988:xxx). One finds the influence of these notions in the works of Brockelmann and Reckendorf and also in works on Semitic syntax written later in the century, such Bloch (1946) and Bravmann (1953).

A thorough treatment of syntactic function is also found in studies of the Semitic verbal system that were made in the 19th century, especially that of Hebrew which received particular attention. Detailed investigations of the function of the Hebrew verbs led scholars to recognize many of the functional complexities exhibited by the various verbal forms. A major contribution was made in this respect by S.R. Driver in his *Treatise on the Use of the Tenses in Hebrew* (1874), in which he identified features of meaning that we would now term aspect and mood, as well as pragmatic features of the use of verbs, such as the performative perfect.

Another approach that was taken to explain certain aspects of the syntax of Semitic languages was the consideration of rhythmic structure. Ehelolf (1916), for example, in his analysis of Akkadian word order, demonstrated that constituents tended to be ordered according to their length, with the longer one being placed after the shorter ones. This was inspired by Behagel's "Gesetz der wachsenden Glieder", which was one of the laws that he formulated for Germanic word order (1909). This "endweighting" principle was later identified in the syntax of other Semitic languages, e.g. in Arabic by Beeston (1970:110) and in Hebrew by Friedman (1971).

The increasing interest in comparative-historical grammar of the Semitic languages that arose in the second half of the 19th century was concerned primarily with phonology and morphology. Some treatments of Semitic syntax, nevertheless, considered comparative-historical issues. The classic case of this was the second volume of Brockelmann's *Grundriss der vergleichenden Grammatik der semitischen Sprachen,* which was devoted entirely to syntax. Brockelmann recognized, however, that syntax was not amenable to a comparative-historical treatment in the same way as phonology and morphology. The main body of the work is a presentation of a traditional taxonomy of syntactic categories illustrated by examples from a variety of Semitic languages. His stated aim, nonetheless, was not typological comparison, but rather the distinction between historically primitive syntactic structures and those that are later developments (*Grundriss* II, p.3.). His comparative approach, therefore, corresponded in spirit to the genealogical framework of the first volume of the Grundriss, which was concerned with phonology and morphology. He was primarily concerned with syntactic structures in the attested languages that would cast light on the primitive syntactic structures of Semitic. For this reason his comparative syntax did not direct much attention to the syntax of some of the "peripheral" Semitic languages that are heavily influenced by that of non-Semitic languages with which they are in contact.

A number of monographs on specific topics of Semitic syntax that were concerned primarily with a comparative-historical approach were also published in the 20th century. Particular interest was shown in the historical development of the Semitic verbal system (see McFall 1982 for

a survey of published works). The historical development of various other aspects of syntax has also attracted interest, especially within the corpus of the Hebrew Bible. Some examples of works on the historical syntax of Hebrew are A. Kropat (1909) and E. Kuhr (1929). We may mention here also the work of Bravmann (1953) on cleft sentences and Semitic word order and D. Cohen (1984) on the development of the nominal sentence and the verbal system in the Semitic languages.

The comparison of the syntax of the newly discovered languages such as Akkadian and Ugaritic with that of other Semitic languages has led to some important advances. This certainly applies to a number of aspects of Hebrew syntax, such as the function of some prepositions and particles, which has been clarified by comparison with the function of cognate elements in Ugaritic.

By the middle of the 20th century, a synchronic structuralist analysis of language was favoured in the mainstream of general linguistics. The ideal of most structuralists was to concentrate on the classification of linguistic units on the basis of their distribution in a synchronic segment of language. This took attention away from the full range of functions performed by the syntactic structures. It was taxonomy by category and arrangement in its extreme form. It, nevertheless, had the advantage of introducing objectivity in syntactic description and breaking away from the preconceived Latin based taxonomy. It also avoided introspective psychological explanations. This structuralist distributional approach to syntax has been adopted by I. Garbell (1965) in her description of the Neo-Aramaic dialect of the Jews of Azerbaijan. It has also inspired a number of studies in Semitic syntax, mainly in North West Semitic and Biblical Hebrew, which strive for objectivity by an exhaustive examination of the distribution of phenomena in a fixed corpus. These include such works as those of F. Andersen (1970) on the Biblical Hebrew verbless clause, J. Hoftijzer (1965) on the particle *'et* in Biblical Hebrew and Contini (1982) on the verbless clause in North West Semitic. We should also mention in this connection the work of W. Richter and his school on Hebrew grammar, which adheres to a strict distributional methodology, cf. for example the comprehensive grammar by Richter (1978–80) and the monograph by Gross (1987), which treats an individual topic of syntax (extraposition). Entire monographs have been devoted to an exhaustive analysis of the syntax of the noun, such as Michel (1977) and Kapeliuk (1994).

The shift towards a synchronic analysis of language has also given rise to "contrastive" comparisons between languages rather than comparisons for the sake of establishing historical developments. Some studies of this nature have involved Semitic languages (e.g. Ennaji 1985, Werner 1995 and Shlonsky 1997). In some cases the contrastive studies are concerned with dialectal variation in the syntax of a Semitic language (e.g. Hayes 1985 on the Western Akkadian dialects and Folmer 1995 on the dialects of Aramaic in the Achaemenid period). We should also note here that, following the move away from diachronic studies of language in structuralist linguistics, many treatments of the Semitic verbal system since the middle of the 20th century have focused on the synchronic function of the verbal forms rather than on their historical background. A number of these studies offer detailed analyses of temporal, modal and aspectual dimensions of the verbal system, as did S.R. Driver before the comparative-historical approach became the fashion. This applies to some recent work on the verbal system of individual Semitic languages, e.g. Nebes (1982) for Arabic, Verreet (1988) for Ugaritic and Hoberman (1989) for Neo-Aramaic.

The development of transformational grammar by N. Chomsky put syntax in the centre of attention in general linguistics. The transformational model of grammar offered a theory that was intended to explain the form of syntactic structures. It was based on the assumption that the fundamental descriptive taxonomy of syntax was known. It was claimed, moreover, that the transformational rules were of universal application to human language in general. Much of the attention of the transformationalists was on the theory of language acquisition. A number of attempts were made to apply some type of transformational analysis to a Semitic language. See the contribution of J. Malone in this volume for a detailed discussion of the application of Chomskyan theories to Semitic languages. Some monographs that treat syntax of Arabic in this framework are Khrakovskii (1973), Wise (1975), Al-Khuli (1979), Bakir (1980), Al-Waer (1987) and Fehri (1993). Some examples of studies in Hebrew are Ornan (1969), Cole (1976) and Berman (1978). Shlonsky (1997) treats both Arabic and Hebrew in this framework. This model of linguistic theory, however, was designed primarily to explore the potential of language structure, often by appealing to highly artificial sentences, rather than describe and explain attested linguistic structures. It was generally concerned, moreover, with a limited range of constructions and not a complete taxonomy.

Following the work of J.H. Greenberg (1966), much attention has been given in general linguistics to the comparison of the syntax of languages to establish typological universals. The contention of this school of thought has been that certain features of syntax typically co-occur with or 'imply' other features. Languages in which the dominant order of clause components is Verb-Subject-Object, for example, have been found "with overwhelming more-than-chance frequency" to have the adjective after the noun (Greenberg's Universal number 17). It has been argued

that languages that exhibit an inconsistency with the normal typological tendencies are in a process of historical change in some features of their syntax. This approach, therefore, was seen as an important tool for comparative-historical syntax. It has received relatively little attention, however, among scholars working on Semitic languages. In general, consideration of Semitic languages in this framework has been restricted to general linguists with a knowledge of one or more Semitic language. Some attention has been given to Semitic languages, mainly Hebrew, by the general linguist T. Givon (e.g. 1977). One should note also the work of A. Faber (1980), who used the theory of typological tendencies in word order to study historical change in Semitic syntax.

In general linguistics over the last two decades, there has been an increasing interest in the study of syntax within the context in which it is used. In contrast to transformational grammar, which regarded syntax as an autonomous component of language, independent of the level of meaning, it is now widely recognized that many aspects of syntactic structure are determined by features of the context of communication. The study of syntax within the context in which it is used belongs to a discipline that is generally referred to as discourse analysis or text linguistics, the former being the normal term used by North American linguists and their followers and the latter being the more usual term that is used in continental Europe. The study of language in context, however, includes not only the adjacent discourse (i.e. the linguistic context), but also such features as the presuppositions of the speaker/writer with regard to the knowledge of the hearer/reader and the type of act of communication, or "speech act", that the speaker/writer intends to perform. The focus of this type of approach is on the communicative function of language structure rather than rules governing the potential limits of structure, which preoccupied the transformational grammarians. For this reason the term "functional grammar" is sometimes applied to the discipline.

The growth of interest in discourse analysis has led to a more descriptive study of attested syntactic data than was the case with transformational grammar. In recent years an increasing number of studies in Semitic syntax have been made with this approach. There is by no means a general consensus concerning the scope and methodology of discourse analysis. As we have seen, there is indeed no agreement concerning the name of the discipline. Applications of discourse analysis to Semitic languages have followed various approaches. Some are based on a methodology developed by Joseph Grimes (1975) and Robert Longacre (cf. for example 1976 and 1996), which is ultimately founded on the tagmemic analysis of language proposed by Kenneth and Evelyn Pike (1983). According to this approach, language can be segmented at levels higher than the sentence,

such as paragraphs and episodes, and each segment has a specific function in relation to other segments. Longacre himself has applied this framework to an analysis of Biblical Hebrew (1989). Some other analyses of Biblical Hebrew syntax following a similar methodology are Andersen (1974), Eskhult (1990) and Dawson (1994). Khan (1988) has used some aspects of this methodology in the analysis also of other Semitic languages.

Some studies on Semitic syntax are based on the theories of the German linguist Harald Weinrich (1977), which overlaps to some extent with the concepts of the tagmemic school, but puts greater emphasis on features such as the attitude and perspective that are adopted by the speaker. The theories of Weinrich have acted as the basis of the work of a number of Hebraists, e.g. H. Schneider (1982), A. Niccacci (1990) and Talstra (1978, 1982, 1983, 1982).

Some work on Semitic syntax has adopted a functional approach to syntax that is concerned with the presuppositions of the speaker/writer and the interaction between the information structure of a clause and its syntactic ordering. This approach has been developed particularly among the Prague school (cf. Firbas 1992) and by M.A.K. Halliday (Halliday and Hasan 1976 and Halliday 1985), S.C. Dik (1978, 1980, 1989) and K. Lambrecht (1994). The issues that are examined include the identification of the topic of the clause and whether items in a clause convey new information or information that is assumed by the speaker/writer to be recoverable from the context. Goldenberg (1971), (1977) and (1990), for example, has used notions concerning the information structure of the clause to explain the use of the "tautological infinitive" and the syntax of the clause in Semitic languages. The study of "emphasis" in Biblical Hebrew by Muraoka (1985) uses some concepts that fall under this head. Gianto (1990) makes a functional study of the ordering of clause components in the Akkadian of Byblos on the basis of information structure. Kapeliuk (1994) elucidates the use of the definite article in Amharic by examining the information structure of the clauses. Murre-van den Berg (1995) uses this framework for Neo-Aramaic and Abdul-Raof (1998) for Arabic. Some of the work of Givon on "topic continuity" is based on this approach, see especially the volume edited by him (1983), which contains studies of topic continuity in Biblical Hebrew narrative (Fox) and Amharic narrative (Gasser). A number of recent studies of Biblical Hebrew word order have used similar functional approaches.

It should be noted that, whereas these discourse orientated approaches mark a radical change from structuralist and Chomskyan approaches to syntax, many elements of functional analysis with which they are concerned can be found already in traditional treatments of Semitic syntax. The modern study of information structure, for example, has its

roots in the psychological theories of language that were developed in the 19th century, such as the notion of psychological subject. As we have seen, these notions were already applied to Semitic languages by scholars such as Brockelmann and Reckendorf. The study of the functional relationship between clauses, which is integral to the tagmemic approach, moreover, can be found in embryonic form in traditional treatments of "coordinated sentences".

It is beyond the scope of this paper to survey all the recent work on Semitic syntax that has adopted a discourse orientated approach. I intend here to restrict myself to a number of general observations. The study of syntax from a discourse perspective seeks general principles in a language but, due to the nature of the discipline, is restricted to a limited corpus of texts. The traditional taxonomic treatments of Semitic syntax have generally aimed at a comprehensive description of structures that occur in the attested language as a whole, or at least in a wide range of literary texts of different genres. In the traditional approach, the language itself, abstracted from the texts in which it occurs, is the main object of investigation. In the discourse approach to syntax, the language is no longer the only focus of attention but is regarded as a component of a text or act of communication. For this reason, in many discourse orientated approaches to syntax each text has to be treated individually and it is not practical to present analyses that involve a wide range of texts. Many recent studies of Semitic syntax in the context of discourse are indeed restricted to syntactic structures that occur in one single text. The focus of such studies is no longer exclusively the syntax itself but rather it is the analysis of the text from the perspective of syntax. Indeed, discourse approaches to syntax show that many uses of syntax cannot be reduced to general linguistic rules but reflect the personal touch of the writer/speaker in the presentation of the message. For this reason, many syntactic structures in a text must be given individual treatment in the context in which they occur.

Given my preceding remarks, it is significant to note that a very large proportion of recent studies of Semitic syntax from a discourse perpective are devoted to Biblical Hebrew. Several surveys have been published recently of work on the syntax of Biblical Hebrew in the framework of discourse analysis. The reader is referred to these for further bibliographical references. These include Dawson (1994), Eskhult (1994–1995) and Merwe (1997). Note also the volume edited by Bergen (1994).

The discourse analysis of syntax has been adopted by many biblical scholars as a means to elucidate the text of Scripture, which is, of course, one of the primary aims of biblical studies. This development in biblical

analysis has been facilitated by the current movement away from historical criticism and the increasing tendency to treat the biblical text in its attested form as a literary unity worthy of synchronic analysis into its constituent components. Discourse treatments of the syntax of Biblical Hebrew are closely allied to works on literary analysis and rhetorical criticism, which have appeared in abundance in recent years. The principal concern of these types of work is the study of the literary artistry of the text and the motivation for its structure. The reader is referred to the bibliographical survey of rhetorical criticism of the Bible by Watson and Hauser (1994).

Scholars have not had the same motivation to apply discourse analysis to texts in other Semitic languages. The reason, it seems, is that there is not so much interest to undertake a minute analysis and exegesis of these texts. Discourse orientated studies of other Semitic languages tend to focus on the ordering of clause components as a reflection of the information structure of the clause rather than on a suprasentential analysis of the structure of discourse. Some studies of the syntax of Semitic languages other than Hebrew that take into account the structure of discourse are Belova (1985), in which a form of discourse analysis is applied to the syntax of Arabic, and Khan (1988), where the syntax of a variety of Semitic languages is studied in the context of the structure of discourse.

There is nothing special about Biblical Hebrew as a language that makes it more amenable to a discourse analysis of its syntax than other Semitic languages. In fact, some of the methodologies of discourse analysis are more easily applied to living spoken languages. This is especially the case with regard to the information structure of clauses and also the functional relation between clauses, which are often signalled explicitly by stress and intonation in spoken languages.

Another point of difference between the traditional taxonomic approach to Semitic syntax and the discourse approach is that in the traditional approach there was far more consensus and objectivity concerning the assessment of the data. The taxonomic approach was concerned primarily with the classification of observable syntactic structures. The discourse approach is concerned to a greater extent with function and meaning. This necessitates a greater degree of interpretation and exegesis, which opens up the possibility of differences of opinion.

In the traditional approach, moreover, there was far more consensus concerning the method of treating the data. When a Semitist of the 19th century such as Nöldeke arranged the taxonomy of syntactic data in one of his grammars, he felt no need to justify his approach or explain most of his terminology and concepts. He is unlikely, moreover, to have had any doubt concerning the boundaries of his syntactic description. The wide

ranges of different discourse approaches to syntax that are found in the literature reflect the fact that there is no consensus either with the method of treating data or with the limits of the investigation. Some discourse treatments of syntax carry the elucidation of the data beyond the language structure into fields such as cognitive psychology and sociology.

At the beginning of my paper I proposed that in some respects the study of Semitic syntax has come full circle and taken on some features of the earliest treatments of Semitic syntax in the Middle Ages. My intention is that in the early medieval works and in many recent discourse studies of syntax, the focus is primarily on the analysis of the text rather than the language system. This has meant that, in many of the recent treatments of Biblical Hebrew syntax at least, the partitions between the study of syntax, rhetorical criticism and exegesis have fallen away and syntax, rhetoric and exegesis are treated as a single discipline, as was the case in the early period of Hebrew and Arabic grammatical thought.

I should like to conclude by making a few comments on some desiderata for the future of studies in Semitic syntax.

One may infer from my preceding remarks that there is a crisis of purpose in the study of Semitic syntax as to whether one should focus on the language or on the text. I believe that this should be regarded as a broadening of purpose rather than a crisis. There is no reason why in future the syntax of a Semitic language should not be studied at two levels, that of its structure and that of its communicative function. The structural analysis could conform to the traditional type of taxonomy whereas the functional analysis would take into account discourse context. The analysis of syntax in its discourse context, however, would have to be restricted, for practical purposes, to a small text corpus and possibly even a single text. It should be pointed out that important work is still being done by applying a traditional taxonomic approach to Semitic syntax. I should like to mention, for example, the brilliant study of Syriac sentence structure of G. Goldenberg (1983), which clarifies many aspects of this area of syntax by offering a more elaborate category and arrangement taxonomy of the data than is offered by the standard grammars of the language. Some recent work on Semitic syntax has indeed combined to some extent a traditional taxonomy with a functional approach. This is the case, for example, with the excellent syntax of Hebrew by B.K. Waltke and M. O'Connor (1990), which incorporates some of the insights gained from the study of the function of syntax in discourse.

It has been remarked that the extension of syntactic analysis to the study of the function of syntax in discourse has blurred the boundaries of syntax. An investigator of syntax is likely to be in doubt as to how far the analysis should be carried. I believe an important consideration in this regard is the readership at which a grammatical description is aimed. Elementary pedagogical grammars of Semitic languages generally do not contain a detailed treatment of syntax. In most university courses nowadays, the time spent by students on elementary language courses in Semitic languages is quite limited and more time is devoted to the reading of texts. For practical purposes, therefore, lengthy treatments of syntax in a pedagogical context should be separated from elementary grammars. Even at a more advanced level, a student may wish to have an overview of syntactic structures in the language as a whole. For such purposes, the traditional descriptive taxonomy would still be the most suitable method of presentation.

At the level of research publications consideration of the purpose of the work influences the extent to which syntax is treated. Investigators making grammatical descriptions of a language or dialect who are aiming primarily at a comparative study may regard it as a priority to focus on phonology and morphology. A detailed treatment of syntax is more appropriate to an independent, synchronic approach to the language, especially the treatment of syntax within discourse, in which the perspective is limited to individual texts. Ideally, perhaps, a reference grammar of a language should serve the needs both of the comparativist and also of investigators interested in the details of syntactic structures and functions.

As I remarked above, there is no consensus over the methodology of investigating the function of syntax or the limits of the investigation. This, I believe, is a more serious problem. It is an obstacle to investigators who wish to undertake such research on the Semitic languages. A consequence of the lack of consensus is that studies following one particular methodology may have a relatively limited appeal. A solution to this problem may be to take an eclectic approach, as far as this is feasible. In a similar vein, since the analysis of the function of syntax in literary texts is often open to various interpretations, one should avoid taking too dogmatic an approach and remain open to various alternative opinions.

A further point that one needs to take into consideration is the background of literary texts. As I have remarked, the rapid growth in works on the discourse analysis of Biblical Hebrew syntax has been facilitated in part by the fact that historical criticism of the Bible has fallen from favour among many scholars and that the text as we have it is treated synchronically as a literary unity. This attitude to the Biblical text, or indeed to any literary text, should not blind the investigator to the fact that some syntactic aspects of the text are readily explicable by studying the historical, literary and cultural background of the text rather than the internal structure of the text itself.

Finally, as I have indicated above, some of the problems of interpretation of the function of syntax disappear when one studies a language in its spoken form. The information structure of clauses and the semantic connection between clauses, both of which can generally be established in written texts only with a certain degree of subjective interpretation, are objectively signalled by stress and intonation patterns in a spoken language. I would like to express the hope, therefore, that future treatments of the spoken Semitic languages do not neglect the study of syntax and that investigators of the spoken languages recognize the insights that can be gained by applying a discourse approach to syntax. In many respects spoken languages are more suitable for discourse analysis than ancient literary texts.

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ISRAEL ORIENTAL STUDIES

XX

SEMITIC LINGUISTICS: THE STATE OF THE ART AT THE TURN OF THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

EDITED BY

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